

9 MAY 1976

*Joint Chiefs, C.I.A. and other villains*

# The Star Spangled Contract

By Jim Garrison.  
372 pp. New York:  
McGraw-Hill Book Co.  
\$8.95.

By LARRY McMURTRY



Jim Garrison.

Probably Mr. Garrison belongs on television. He is as big as Columbo and Kojak put together, and in appearance he out-Perry Masons Raymond Burr. Moreover, his years as the highly visible District Attorney of New Orleans equipped him not merely with a broad knowledge of criminal behavior but, more importantly, with the cynicism requisite to a major career in TV. As the D.A. in a D.A. series, it is hard to see how he could miss.

As a writer, however, he misses effortlessly.

Since the death of President Kennedy there has developed a whole little sub-genre of espionage fiction that deals with the assassination or attempted assassination of an American President. Most of this fiction appears in paperback originals, and in most of it one or more of the branches of our far-flung intelligence community are involved in the attempted killing. It is to this sub-genre that "The Star Spangled Contract," belongs, but it is far from being a distinguished type.

This type, one might add, seldom claims any distinction but readability. In the hands of an able practitioner like, say, James Philip Atlee—the John D. MacDonald of espionage fiction—the reader can expect a simple story, economically told, in an uncluttered style that throws back to the hard-boiled fiction of the 30's.

In "The Star Spangled Contract," however, the simple story is allowed to flounder for 372 pages, only to reach a conclusion that those familiar with the genre will have considered inevitable from page 2. A young, fantastically skilled intelligence agent—a former Green Beret, as the formula demands—is allowed to discover an emerging plot to kill the President.

Being naïve and patriotic he sets out to thwart it. In the course of his efforts he kills

a few people with his bare hands and at least one person with his booted feet, but he gets nowhere. To his horror he discovers that he is putty in the hands of the great, sinister Agencies. The President has little chance. If the Joint Chiefs don't get him the C.I.A. will; if the C.I.A. doesn't, his own advisers will. The President's only chance is to lose in a forthcoming election, but the young agent, in his bumbling efforts to preserve the democratic way of life, only succeeds in eliminating this possibility.

There is evidence scattered here and there through the narrative that Mr. Garrison would just as soon have us read "The Star Spangled Contract" as prophecy, rather than fiction. The vision he offers is of a country in which the President has long since been a figurehead. All the power is outside the Oval Office, and this power has at its command ultra-sensitive intelligence analysis and, of course, a super-computer. Essential to this vision is the notion of a select and overwhelmingly professional cadre of Agency heads, most of them veterans of the O.S.S.; men able to weigh instantly the most complex data and come out with the right decisions.

It is here that "The Star Spangled Contract" seems to take wing into pure fantasy. Nothing that has come to light in recent months about any branch of our bureaucracy allows us to deduce the presence of any supremely competent mastermind anywhere in it.

Still, Mr. Garrison could have had a readable story if only he had cut it in half and left out all scenes between men and women. In his love scenes he sinks to a level well beneath what any self-respecting pulp writer would permit himself.

Larry McMurtry is a novelist.